

Drug Intelligence Brief

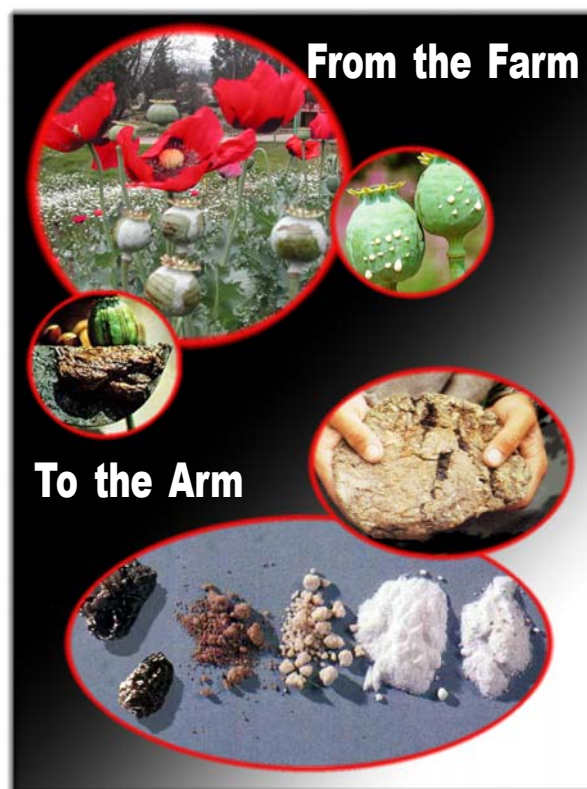


DRUG ENFORCEMENT ADMINISTRATION
INTELLIGENCE DIVISION

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HEROIN SIGNATURE PROGRAM: 2001

Since 1977, the Drug Enforcement Administration's Special Testing and Research Laboratory has conducted annual in-depth chemical analyses of between 600 and 900 heroin samples, under the auspices of the Intelligence Division's Heroin Signature Program (HSP). These samples have been obtained from heroin seizures and purchases made in the United States. The analyses determine each sample's source area. This is possible because the production process in each of the world's heroin-producing regions—South America (primarily Colombia), Mexico, Southeast Asia (primarily Burma), and Southwest Asia (primarily Afghanistan)—has a unique "signature." The source area for approximately 90 to 95 percent of the samples analyzed can be identified each year. Chemical analysis also generates data on the purity of wholesale quantities of heroin.



In 2001, South American (SA) heroin had the highest average purity of all source areas, in addition to 56 percent of the heroin analyzed by weight. For the last 7 years, South America has accounted for the majority of the heroin analyzed under the HSP. The percentage of SA heroin decreased by 3 percent from 2000 to 2001, while Mexican heroin rose from 17 to 30 percent during the same period. This increase in Mexican heroin was due to several large seizures in 2001. Southeast (SEA) and Southwest Asian heroin (SWA) each accounted for 7 percent.

2001 HEROIN SIGNATURE PROGRAM

Heroin Source Area	Annual Percentage	Weight (kilograms)	Percent Pure
South America	56	537	78
Mexico	30	292	30
Southwest Asia	7	69	69
Southeast Asia	7	65	68

Signature analysis is the only scientifically based source of information currently available on the origin of heroin encountered in the U.S. drug market. HSP data are reported annually and provide the basis of percentages for both the number of heroin seizures and net weight from each source area. The program is continually validated by associating authentic source-country samples with the results of chemical analysis.

Fluctuations from year to year in source area proportions are often the result of shifting law enforcement priorities; changes in trafficking patterns; or exceptionally large seizures, which may boost a source area's HSP representation. To achieve a comprehensive assessment of heroin importation and trafficking in the United States, HSP data must be merged with investigative intelligence, drug production estimates, and seizure statistics.

Smuggling Patterns in 2001

Seizure data from 2001 indicated that the smuggling patterns and processing methods of the analyzed heroin closely resembled those of previous years. Couriers on commercial airline flights brought most of the SA heroin into the United States. As in past years, Mexican heroin entered the country concealed in vehicles. However, in a departure from the traditional pattern of only transporting between 1- and 3-kilogram amounts on each smuggling trip, there were seizures of double-digit quantities of Mexican heroin. West Africans continued to be heavily involved in the smuggling of both SEA and SWA heroin. A 58-kilogram seizure of SEA heroin, from a maritime shipment that originated in Burma, was the largest single seizure of this type of heroin in the last several years.

South American Heroin

A large portion of SA heroin couriers flew directly from Colombia to either New York City or Miami. Most often these couriers departed from Bogotá, but occasionally couriers left from Cali or Barranquilla. In an attempt to evade law enforcement detection, some couriers' tickets showed that their flights originated in Ecuador, Panama, Guatemala, Aruba, or Venezuela; while others originated in Chile or the Dominican Republic. A few couriers began their trips in Argentina, which is a base for some Colombian heroin transportation groups. In San Juan, Puerto Rico, several cruise ship passengers were arrested for possessing heroin.

The predominant method of heroin smuggling was ingestion; couriers often swallowed approximately 100 pellets of heroin, which often had a total weight of 1,000 grams. Some couriers concealed the drug in their shoes, luggage, or they taped it to their bodies. There also were several incidents in which heroin had been meticulously concealed in the linings of clothes.

Mexican Heroin

Most of the Mexican heroin seized was of the black tar variety, so named because it has the appearance of roofing tar or coal. Black tar heroin has a unique consistency because Mexican processors skip the chemical treatment and filtering steps in the

production process, steps that enable processors in other source areas to produce a white powder form of heroin. While black tar heroin was the dominant type confiscated, there were also seizures of Mexican brown powder heroin.

Some Mexican heroin couriers crossed the border at California's San Ysidro and Otay Mesa ports of entry (POEs), often with 1- to 3-kilogram amounts of heroin concealed in their vehicles. Other POEs included border cities in New Mexico and Texas.

For decades, couriers arrested at POEs were rarely in possession of more than 3 kilograms of Mexican heroin. A departure from that practice was noted in 2000, when several seizures ranged from 10 to 46 kilograms. This trend continued in 2001, when authorities made three seizures in the mid-20-kilogram range, one seizure of 42 kilograms, and one in the San Francisco Bay area city of Newark of 74 kilograms.

Southwest Asian Heroin

West African nationals brought most of the SWA heroin analyzed under the HSP into the United States. Often couriers began their trips in the African countries of Nigeria and Ghana, but others transited Europe before reaching the United States. Regardless of their itineraries, almost all of the African couriers disembarked at JFK International Airport in New York City. Although swallowing pellets of heroin was a common smuggling method, the drug was also concealed in luggage or shoes. Quantities transported usually ranged between 500 and 1,500 grams.

Southeast Asian Heroin

Ethnic Chinese traffickers were involved in a 58-kilogram maritime shipment of SEA heroin. The heroin arrived from Burma, the primary source of SEA heroin, in January 2001 at the Port of Elizabeth in New Jersey, where it was seized. This was the largest seizure of SEA heroin in several years. The heroin was destined for New York City, the traditional center of SEA heroin trafficking in the United States. When even larger quantities of SEA heroin were seized in this country in the late 1980s and early 1990s, they also were shipped as maritime cargo and were also destined for New York City.

Note: West African couriers used the same routes and methods to smuggle both SEA and SWA heroin into the United States. West African traffickers easily deal in both SEA and SWA heroin because they either live in, or have contacts with, long-established communities of West Africans in Pakistan and Thailand, both heroin transit countries. Pakistan is a major transit area for SWA heroin produced in Afghanistan, and Thailand is a major egress point for SEA heroin from Burma. West African couriers generally transport heroin from these source areas to West Africa before smuggling the drug into the United States.

HEROIN SIGNATURE PROGRAM

Geographic Source Area Distribution (in percent*)
Based on Net Weight of Heroin Seized and Analyzed

	Mexico	Southeast Asia	Southwest Asia	South America
1977	89	9	2	**
1978	82	15	3	**
1979	48	13	39	**
1980	38	11	51	**
1981	36	10	54	**
1982	34	14	52	**
1983	33	19	48	**
1984	32	17	51	**
1985	39	14	47	**
1986	42	22	36	**
1987	42	25	33	**
1988	29	46	25	**
1989	27	56	17	**
1990	21	56	23	**
1991	21	58	21	**
1992	10	58	32	**
1993	8	68	9	15
1994	5	57	6	32
1995	5	17	16	62
1996	20	8	20	52
1997	14	5	6	75
1998	17	14	4	65
1999	24	10	6	60
2000	17	8	16	59
2001	30	7	7	56

* Percentage based on samples for which a signature was identified. In 2001, 95 percent of the samples were classified.

** The signature for heroin from South America was developed in July 1993; therefore, this figure represents only partial-year data.

Note: The dominant source area is indicated in bold.

This report was prepared by the Domestic Strategic Intelligence Unit of the Office of Strategic Intelligence. This report reflects information received prior to June 2003. Comments and requests for copies are welcome and may be faxed to the Intelligence Production Unit, Intelligence Division, DEA Headquarters, at (202) 307-8726.